

Was the October Revolution a *coup d'état*?

Essay: 2,500 word (70%) - submission deadline is **16 December 2024**

A-Level Essay

There is a debate amongst historians about whether the 1917 October Revolution was a popular uprising or a *coup d'état*. A Popular Revolution is one supported by the majority with mass protests, a lack of resistance and sometimes led by the majority of the population of that country. A *coup d'état* is a quick seizure of power by a small group who planned the revolt in secret, it is also one executed with violence and force, this is the more accurate representation of how the Bolsheviks seized power.

To Soviet historians, the October Revolution was a popular uprising led and carried out by the working class and peasants. This view states that the working class created the soviets, which acted as a base to the Revolution. This view also credits Lenin by saying he was the leader who wanted to liberate the Russian people from the PG. Between the February Revolution and October, the Bolshevik Party grew from a relatively small organisation to a mass party. It was historian Sheila Patrick who said it was the soldiers, workers and peasants that created the conditions in which the Bolshevik revolt could operate. This suggests that she thought it was a popular Revolution as the majority of population in the major cities created the conditions for the Revolution by creating soviets and committees before the Bolsheviks came along. There was a growth of radicalism in the masses after February that aided that takeover, the workers had expected a social reform but the workers aims were only slowly being achieved by the Provisional Government (PG). Although wages were increasing, prices were also increasing, and this led to strikes in the cities. The workers started seeing themselves as 'citizens' that were worthy of the respect of their managers and they demanded action for issues such as equal pay for women, child labour, working conditions and shorter hours. The workers had become more politicised and the Provisional Government couldn't handle the aggressiveness from the labourers, and it couldn't mediate between employers and workers. Because the workers weren't getting the reform, they wanted, the PG became less popular while Bolsheviks became more popular. Support in the cities for Bolsheviks also increased due to Bolshevik propaganda. Lenin introduced the April Thesis, adopting the slogans of the people revolution, he promised 'Peace, bread, land'. This made him popular with the peasants as well, as they wanted immediate action for all these aims. Hunger was a crucial factor in October, and even in the countryside the peasants were getting land seized by landowners and couldn't wait for the PG anymore, so although they didn't support the Bolsheviks, they willingly

accepted their aims and promise of land. Support also built-up as the Bolsheviks were the only Party that promised an immediate end to the war, the Social Revolutionary Party promised an end but wanted to wait until it was necessary to avoid conflict and paying debts to allies and Germany's harsh terms. The Bolsheviks were becoming popular in cities as support for the PG was declining. The Provisional Government was unelected and seen as a dictatorial body by the proletariat with Prince Lvov as its Prime Minister. The people would have been displeased with an aristocrat as Prime Minister and were also greatly affected by the PG's decisions to continue World War One, postponing land reforms and them doing nothing about the deterioration of the economy, making them increasingly unpopular and adding to the radicalisation of the workers. When the Soviets (elected by soldiers, workers, and peasants) started to appear and got elected in Moscow, Lenin declared 'All power to the Soviets' showing him backing the Soviets taking over the PG in governing Russia, and this became extremely effective in increasing his popularity. By October 1917, the Provisional Government was thoroughly discredited and attracted hatred and contempt, while the Bolsheviks had a huge spike in support from August to October and in the November Constituent assembly elections, the Bolsheviks received 175 seats.

However, there is evidence that supports the argument of the Bolshevik Revolution being a coup d'état. The Predominant Western view arose after the second World War, the West and Soviet Union were involved in a cold war, the USA funded research to find out more about the enemy. They believed that the Revolution was a straight line from Leninism to totalitarianism (centralized government with no civil rights or democracy). This view depicts a well-planned, secretly organised seizing of power that was almost immediate in the Bolshevik central committee. The Bolsheviks gained control of the Petrograd Soviet, previously owned by the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, in September and Trotsky became chairman allowing him to create the Red guard. One main factor of a coup d'état is taking over key points in the city, and that is exactly what Trotsky did. He used the Military Revolutionary Committee to take over key infrastructure in the city giving them a vantage point as the PG wouldn't be able to communicate. Led by Trotsky the MRC was able to secure support of the Petrograd Garrison and the Kronstadt soldiers. The final assault on the Winter Palace was a coup d'état but the Bolsheviks presented it as a mass uprising. The event was portrayed as a heroic takeover in painting and pictures and even film. However, this is inaccurate, the Bolsheviks had taken the key points in Petrograd with no opposition and the storming of the Winter Palace was a small-scale military action that was planned last minute and took place in the early

hours of the day, historian R. Pipes even stated 'planned in the dead of night on October 10th and executed two weeks later' this reinforces the predominant view that presents the Revolution as a coup. The assault was a quiet quick capture of the building. Bolsheviks stormed the Palace that was guarded by cadets from military school and women. The soldiers inside were drunk and the cadets had put up little resistance, the women were allowed to leave so there were few casualties you could almost say it was bloodless. By October it was the soldiers leading any military action in support of the Bolsheviks, not the workers. It is in this sense that the Bolshevik Revolution resembles a coup. A small political party backed up by the military acting in the capital city, supported by only the major cities as they were not popular throughout the countryside. The communist regime that grew out of this was an inherently tyrannical and dictatorial system where the political views of a minority were imposed on the unwilling majority of Russians. So, the October Revolution is more of a coup than a popular revolution.

There were lots of people that did not support the Bolsheviks. Although the workers and soldiers voted for the Bolsheviks in elections this does not mean that they supported the one party state policy, the November elections could be seen as a disaster for the Bolsheviks as they got less than a quarter of the votes which was largely from the workers in the cities, and the SR's got 40% with the majority being peasant support. There was a clear lack of opposition to the seizure of power in October and to the termination of the Constituent assembly. There was a civil war not long after Lenin took power. People began to fight the Bolsheviks as they were dissatisfied with them and began to realise how idealistic they were. When Lenin was faced with the reality of being in Government he failed to deal with the problems. The Bolshevik Party was split into three in January 1918 with each favouring a different way to end the War- A Revolutionary war, Trotsky's 'no war, no peace' and Lenin's policy of peace at any price. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 was a big factor that contributed to the anger of the people. Lenin's promise of 'Peace, Land, Bread' had been broken as the Russians lost land and had to pay reparations to Germany in order to stop the war. Anger arose from Liberals and Mensheviks and people started to join the anti-Bolshevik White Party made up of Liberals, SR's, and former Tsarists. This was not what Lenin had promised the people of Russia and so the Bolsheviks grew unpopular.

In conclusion, I think that the October Revolution was more of a coup d'état than a popular uprising. The Bolsheviks are seen to have started off popular with key figures leading the party such as Lenin and his ability to motivate through public speaking and propaganda. Lenin was supported by the workers peasants and soldiers; however, this support was limited

to the capital cities as outside there was more support for the Social Revolutionaries. When it was time for the Bolsheviks to seize power, they faced little resistance. So, although there was some popularity, in order to take control and stay in power, the Bolsheviks did not have enough support and so had to rely on secretly planned violent attacks. This supports the idea that the October Revolution was a coup d'état.